Time Is Short: The Urgent Call to Repent

A message from Luke 13:1–9

Reed S. Rusniak, July 2026

Text: Luke 13:1–9

> *There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?* ***No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*** *Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?* ***No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*** *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him,* ***'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*** *(ESV)*

Every week, the news brings word of a tragedy somewhere, a fire, a crash, a shooting, a storm that swept through and took lives without warning. We hear it, we shake our heads, and most of us move on with our day within a few minutes.

Something very similar happened in the passage before us today. Some people came to Jesus with shocking news. Pilate, the Roman governor, had murdered a group of Galileans while they were in the very act of offering sacrifices to God, **and their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices.** This was a horrifying, sacrilegious act. The people bringing this report to Jesus likely expected one of two responses from him, either an outcry against Pilate's cruelty or perhaps an explanation for why those particular Galileans deserved such a fate.

You see, **it was a common assumption in that culture, and it is still common today, that great suffering must be the result of great sin.** Bad things happen to bad people, we tell ourselves, and that comforts us because we do not think of ourselves as all that bad.

Jesus does something in this passage that none of them expected. He does not defend Pilate. He does not condemn the Galileans as unusually wicked. Instead, he turns the entire conversation around and points it directly at the crowd standing in front of him, and at us. He even adds a second tragedy, one with no human villain at all, the collapse of a tower in Siloam that killed eighteen people in an instant.

And after each example, Jesus says the very same sentence, word for word: **"unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." That single sentence, repeated twice, is the heartbeat of our text. It is the message God has for every one of us today.**

Notice also what Jesus does not do. He does not soften the moment with vague comfort. He does not say, "These things happen," and then move on to something more pleasant. Instead, **he uses a report of someone else's death to press home the most urgent question any of us will ever face: Are you ready to stand before God?**

From this passage, we will see three facts about repentance that we cannot afford to miss: its importance, its necessity, and the limited time we have to respond to it.

First: Repentance Is Necessary for Everyone, Not Just the "Worst" Sinners (vv. 1–3)

Look with me at verses 1 through 3. The people who brought this report about the Galileans were operating on a hidden assumption. They believed those particular men must have been especially wicked to have suffered such a violent, public death at Pilate's hand.

This is an old and very human way of thinking. When tragedy strikes someone else, we often assume, sometimes without realizing it, that they must have done something to deserve it. That assumption gives us a sense of safety and makes us feel more secure in our own goodness.

Jesus corrects this immediately. **"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you."** Notice that **Jesus does not say the Galileans were innocent. He does not say they were unusually guilty either.** He simply refuses to let the conversation remain focused on someone else's sin. Instead, he redirects every ounce of attention to the people standing right in front of him. **"But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."**

Here is the point we must not miss: Repentance is not a message reserved only for those whose lives have been visibly and publicly shattered. It is a message for every single person here, with absolutely no exceptions. Some of us may feel our lives are falling apart in quiet, unseen ways, carrying heavy, silent labels like ***failure***, ***imposter***, **or** ***disappointment*** in our own minds. Whether our struggles are out in the open or hidden behind a polished exterior, we all stand on the exact same ground.

But Jesus is telling us plainly that **comparing our sin to someone else's entirely misses the point**. The man in the three-piece suit and the man sleeping under a bridge stand in exactly the same need before God. Think of it this way. A doctor does not treat only the patients whose illness is visible on the outside and ignore everyone else. Every patient who walks through the door is examined because disease is not always obvious. Sin works in the same way. It is not measured simply by what others can see. God looks at the heart, and every heart, without exception, needs to repent.

Before we go any further, hear this clearly. This message is not for the person next to you. It is aimed at you and at me. It is so easy to listen to a truth like this and quietly point it at someone else's life. Jesus will not allow us that escape. He gently but firmly turns our focus back onto our own hearts.

If you have spent years keeping score, reassuring yourself that you are a decent person because your struggles aren't as visible or dramatic as someone else's, hear the word of Christ today. Comparing ourselves to others was never the measuring stick, and it never will be. The only comparison that matters is between our lives and the perfect holiness of God. And by that standard, every one of us stands on the exact same level ground: we all fall short, and we all need to repent.

Jesus told another short story that fits perfectly here, of a Pharisee and a tax collector who both went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other men, thieves, adulterers, or even like the tax collector standing nearby. He listed his own good deeds as if they were his ticket to heaven. The tax collector, by contrast, would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He simply beat his chest and said, **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."**

Jesus said it was the tax collector, not the respectable Pharisee, who went home right with God that day. The one who compared himself to others went home unchanged. The one who compared himself to God's holiness went home forgiven.

Second: Repentance Is Necessary No Matter How Death Comes (vv. 4–5)

Now look at verses 4 and 5. Jesus offers a second example, and it is important to notice how different it is from the first. The Galileans died because of the deliberate cruelty of a wicked man, Pilate. **The eighteen who died at Siloam died when a tower fell on them, an accident with no human villain involved at all.**

Yet Jesus says the exact same thing about both groups. **"unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." This tells us something we desperately need to hear. The manner of a person's death does not change the reality of the judgment that follows it.**

Whether death comes through another person's violence, a tragic accident, a slow illness, or peacefully in old age, surrounded by family, none of that changes the fact that every person will stand before God and give an account. We often console ourselves with the thought that as long as our death looks normal or peaceful, everything must be fine on the other side.

Jesus removes that false comfort entirely. A quiet death is not a saved death. A sudden death is not a condemned death. **What matters is whether true repentance has already taken place**. This also means we cannot predict or control how or when our own death will come. None of the Galileans woke up that morning expecting Pilate's soldiers. None of the eighteen at Siloam walked past that tower expecting it to be their last walk.

If we cannot know the day or the manner of our death, then assuming we have plenty of time left to get right with God later is a dangerous gamble, not a plan.

Many of us here have lived close to danger. We know what it is to walk away from something that could easily have taken our lives: a crisis, a swimming incident, maybe a car wreck, cancer, or some

other serious illness, or just a night that could have turned out very differently. It is so tempting to look back on those moments and think, ***"I made it through, so I must be all right."*** **But that is exactly the kind of thinking Jesus corrects in this passage.**

Surviving danger is not the same as being right with God. The eighteen who died at Siloam were no more guilty than the crowd that had walked past that same tower safely a hundred times before. Survival is not a verdict of innocence, nor is it a verdict of salvation.

We do not get to write our own report card based on how our story compares to someone else's ending. God alone decides who stands and who falls, and he has already told us plainly what he requires: repentance. **This should strip away every excuse we have been leaning on**. "I have not hurt anyone as badly as he has." "My story could have ended much worse." None of that changes what Jesus says here.

This leads us directly to our final point because Jesus does not leave us with only a warning. He also tells us **something about the patience of God and how long that patience lasts**.

Third: Repentance Cannot Be Put Off Indefinitely (vv. 6–9)

Look now at verses 6 through 9. Jesus tells a parable. A man had a fig tree in his vineyard. Three years in a row, he came looking for fruit on it, and three years in a row, he found none. He tells the vinedresser, **"Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?"**

The vinedresser pleads for more time. **"Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure."** He promises to give the tree every possible advantage: careful digging, fresh fertilizer, and another full season of sun and rain.

But we need to notice something easy to miss here. The vinedresser does not ask for unlimited time. He asks for one more year. Even his request has a built-in limit. The tree represents someone who has heard God's Word, received real blessings and opportunities, yet has produced no fruit of genuine repentance.

The owner's patience in this parable is real, but **it is not endless. Judgment delayed is not judgment canceled! I will say that again. Judgment delayed is not judgment canceled.**

Let me tell you about a man named John Newton. As a young sea captain, Newton worked in the slave trade, a life marked by cruelty and open contempt for God. One night, caught in a violent storm off the coast, Newton became convinced his ship was going down and that he was going to die. In desperation, he cried out to God for mercy. The ship survived.

Newton later called that night the beginning of his turning toward God. But by his own honest account, it took years, not moments, before genuine, fruit-bearing repentance took root in his life. He continued in the slave trade for a time even after that storm. God, in his patience, gave Newton season after season, year after year, until real change finally came. Newton eventually left the trade for good, was

ordained as a minister, and spent the rest of his life writing of grace that could reach "a wretch like me." He is the author of Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.

Here is the point of that story for us today. God does extend seasons of His patience, giving us extra years, extra warnings, extra sermons. But no one is promised that the pattern will repeat forever.

Some of you sitting here today have already been given many more years. Perhaps you cried out to God once during a hard season, a hospital bed, a jail cell, a night you thought you might not survive, and **then things got better**, and **you quietly went back to business as usual**!

The fig tree in this parable was not cut down that day, but it also was not left alone indefinitely. Do not assume there will always be another season, another warning, another invitation like this one.

Notice, too, what the vinedresser actually does with the extra time. He does not simply leave the tree alone and hope things improve on their own. **He digs around it. He puts on manure**. He works. In the same way, God's patience toward you is not meant to be spent the way it always has been spent.

It is meant to be spent digging, breaking up old ground, and allowing things that have been comfortable for far too long to be unsettled.

If God has already given you one more year, a second chance you did not deserve and cannot fully explain, do not waste it doing exactly what you were doing before.

Conclusion

We have seen three things from our text that come from the mouth of Jesus himself.

Repentance is necessary for everyone, not merely for whoever we consider the worst sinners.

Repentance is necessary no matter how death comes, whether by violence, by accident, or by quiet old age.

And repentance cannot be put off indefinitely, because seasons of patience, however many we are given, do eventually come to an end.

The same Jesus who spoke these words to a crowd worried about someone else's tragedy speaks them to us today, **and He is far more concerned with the condition of our own hearts than with anyone else's past**.

Wherever you are today, whatever brought you to this room, and however many more years you may have already been given, **the door of grace is still open right now. Do not leave here today assuming there will always be another chance. Turn from your sin, turn to Christ, and do it now, while the invitation still stands.**

Some of you came here carrying a heavier load than the person sitting next to you even knows. You do not need to compare that load to anyone else's. You need only bring it to Christ.

Jesus did not tell these stories to frighten us for the sake of fear alone. He told them because he is patient, and because his patience is intended to lead every one of us to repentance, not to presumption.

The fig tree was given one more year because someone was willing to dig, to fertilize, to labor over it. Christ has done far more than that for you; he gave his own life so that fruitless branches like us could be made new.

In Summary

1) Repentance Is Necessary for Everyone, Not Just the "Worst" Sinners

2) Repentance Is Necessary No Matter How Death Comes

3) Repentance Cannot Be Put Off Indefinitely

My friend, that is the message of Luke 13**.**

One warning, one Savior, one narrow window of time in which to respond.

May none of us leave this room today the way the fig tree was left, standing, but still without fruit. Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. (Acts 16:31).

Prayer